

The history of the United States is filled with heroes who, through personal sacrifice and a strong commitment to their cause, have left their mark on society. Today, I am proud to honor the life and accomplishments of California's own, the late, talented union organizer, César E. Chávez.

Born on March 31, 1927 to a farming family in Yuma, Arizona, César learned early that life is filled with challenges. He was ten years old when his family lost their farm during the Depression. By 1938, the Chávez family joined thousands of others following the crops throughout the Southwest, eventually making it to California. It was during this period that César began to realize that he and the other migrant workers not only lived in deplorable conditions but also were treated as second-class citizens.

After his tour of duty in the U.S. Navy at the end of World War II, César returned to California with his wife Helena to continue farming. In 1952, he met Fred Ross, an organizer for the Community Service Organization (CSO). César flourished as an active member of this organization, conducting voter registration drives, battling racial and economic discrimination, and organizing new CSO chapters across California and Arizona. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, César became the national director of CSO. But no matter how hard he worked, he continued to have trouble persuading workers to fight for their rights because they were afraid of losing their jobs.

In order to fulfill his desire to create a union for farm workers, César left his position with the CSO in 1962. He traveled from camp to camp recruiting workers. With the assistance of his family, he managed to organize 300 members into the National Farm Workers Union (NFWA), later changed to the United Farm Workers (UFW). Through César's leadership, the UFW gained the national support of unions, church groups, students, minorities, and consumers.

César's commitment brought dignity and respect to the farm workers who organized themselves and became an inspiration and a resource to other Americans and people engaged in human rights struggles throughout the world. His fast in 1968 for 25 days prompted the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy to call him "one of the most heroic figures of our time".

From 1965 through the 1980s, César led numerous strikes, boycotts, and protests—not only to increase wage earnings at the time, but also to increase public awareness to the plight of the migrant workers. During the 1980s, the number of farm workers working under UFW contracts rose tremendously, allowing them to enjoy higher pay, family health coverage, pension benefits and other contract protections.

César E. Chávez worked until his death on April 23, 1993, defending the rights of farm workers to the end. Even now, his spirit and legacy continue to be studied and rewarded. On August 8, 1994, Chavez became only the second Mexican-American to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the United States. Also, in that same year, his family and officers of the UFW created the César E. Chávez Foundation to inspire current and future generations by promoting the ideals of César's life, work, and vision.

The State of California honored his life and work in 2000 by proclaiming March 31st as César

E. Chávez Day. California dedicates the remainder of the week to paying tribute to the great union leader by teaching elementary and secondary school children about his work. I am also honored to announce that I am an original cosponsor of House Resolution 112, which will establish a national legal public holiday in honor of the great social justice leader.

Today, César E. Chávez would have celebrated his 76th birthday. I am proud to celebrate his life and work. May his spirit and dedication continue to be an inspiration to those engaged in human rights struggles throughout the world.